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SUBJECT: DEFENSE MINISTER REVIEWS CSTO, RUSSIA, REGIONAL SECURITY, AND POSSIBLE AFGHANISTAN DEPLOYMENT

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YEREVAN 00000103 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: AMB Marie L. Yovanovitch, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: Defense Minister Seyran Ohanian reviewed Armenia's regional security perspectives with Ambassador February 10. He commented that the recently-announced CSTO reaction force remains only "on paper." He linked Russia's military presence in Armenia to the potential threat posed by Turkish and Azerbaijani troops, while also acknowledging the NATO/IPAP problem created by Armenia's mention of this issue in its National Military Doctrine document. He expressed confidence in Armenian and Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) forces' combined ability to fend off any Azerbaijani attack. Ohanian said President Sargsian is committed to achieving an NK solution during his tenure in office. He expressed support for the idea of Armenian troops deploying with Kansas National Guard troops in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. END SUMMARY

DEVELOPING DEFENSE TIES -- AFGHANISTAN AN OPTION

¶12. (C) Ambassador and Defense Attaché hosted Defense Minister Seyran Ohanian and MG Haik Kotanjian (Commandant of the MOD's Institute of National Strategic Studies and an adviser to the minister) to lunch February 10, in an outreach effort to deepen political-military ties with the Defense Ministry. Ohanian praised President Serzh Sargsian for his work as defense minister to drive Armenian defense reform and advance NATO/IPAP progress. Ohanian said that the Armenian government is still supportive of potential plans for Armenian forces to participate in Afghanistan mission with the Kansas National Guard's (KSNG) upcoming OEF deployment, though he did not go into details. Ohanian also mentioned MOD discussions with Germany over a possible ISAF deployment (reftel). The Ambassador noted that she had also spoken with Foreign Minister Nalbandian about different Afghanistan scenarios, whether with the KSNG or German troops. (COMMENT: Armenia presumably will choose to join either Germany or the U.S., not both, as a means of contributing in Afghanistan, but after several previous failures to find a good partner for its Afghanistan deployment, continues to explore a range of options in search of a good fit. END COMMENT)

CSTO STILL NOTIONAL

¶13. (C) When asked about Armenia's role in the newly-created Joint Rapid Reaction Force (JRRF) of the Collective Security

Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Minister said that Armenia is still studying its objectives for participation in the JRRF, but has not yet designated any operational units to be a part of it. Minister Ohanian is the current Secretary of the CSTO council. He noted that CSTO has been working on this project for some time, but said in reality the JRRF is a long-term project and remains mostly "on paper." There are still many questions that have to be resolved, based on the interests of each member country. General Kotanjian, commented that CSTO JRRF is based upon the NATO Response Force (NRF) model and will have similar missions, such as counter-terrorism and natural disaster response.

RUSSIA'S ROLE IN ARMENIA'S DOMESTIC DEFENSE CALCULATIONS

¶ 14. (C) The Ambassador mentioned her interest in visiting the Russian 102nd Military Base, headquartered in Gyumri. In reply, the Minister said that the primary reason for the Russian 102nd Base dated from Soviet times and was intended to defend against the Turkish Third Field Army, which he contends is still considered a significant security threat to Armenia. The Russian military presence in Armenia is a major component of Armenian security. He said the majority of forces of the Turkish Third Army are within a "120 kilometer Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty exclusion zone" and are not subject to CFE inspections. He said these forces and the Turkish support to Azerbaijani military forces stationed in Nakhichevan pose the greatest security threat to Armenia because they could easily cut Armenia into two.

TURKEY AND NATO

¶ 15. (C) Ohanian recalled the political difficulty created in Armenia's NATO/IPAP process over the fact that Armenia had made explicit reference to the Turkish-Azerbaijani military alliance as a potential threat to Armenia's national security

YEREVAN 00000103 002.2 OF 003

in its National Military Doctrine. He mentioned that these documents are still being worked on, and was hopeful the Armenians could reach an "appropriate" solution. Ohanian said he could not overlook any military threat to the country. (Note: In the spring of 2008, Turkey broke silence concerning the Armenian IPAP approval process over the reference in the IPAP to Armenia's Military Doctrine and its discussion of Turkey as a threat. End Note).

¶ 16. (C) The Minister said that President Sargsian is committed to achieving peaceful reconciliation with Turkey during his term of office. Ohanian was hopeful that the "football diplomacy" between the two presidents will lead to further worthwhile negotiations that would lead to a settlement between the two countries and an eventual opening of the Turkish-Armenian border.

CONFIDENT OF NK SECURITY, DESIRE FOR PEACE

¶ 17. (C) The Minister commented that he is not unduly concerned about the numerical superiority of the Azerbaijani Armed Forces or their recent attempts to improve the quality of their forces. He said he remains confident that NK can be defended from any potential Azerbaijani military action, and that he does not lie awake at nights worrying about NK or an Azerbaijani military attack. He said "their" army is strong, but "our army is ready." Ohanian said that NK Armenians were proud, fierce fighters, but nonetheless -- having seen war -- now prefer a peaceful resolution to the conflict with Azerbaijan over the disputed territories. He expressed confidence that Azerbaijani sentiments are the same, as both sides had tasted the bitter fruits of war.

¶ 18. (C) The Minister stated that the people of NK fully support President Sargsian's policy of peaceful settlement as

the only means of reaching a solution. He said President Sargsian wanted to achieve a settlement during his term. Ohanian stated that NK had never really been a part of an independent Azerbaijan and that the Referendum of 1988 was the real voice of the NK people. A further referendum would really only be duplicative. (Note: The 1988 referendum was for NK to secede from the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic and unify with Armenia. End Note) The Ambassador noted that resolution to the NK conflict would redefine the regional security environment and economic prospects for the better across the region. Ohanian agreed.

A LOST OPPORTUNITY

¶9. (C) Ohanian observed that Armenia had been scheduled to host the June 2009 Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Defense Ministerial meeting, but Azerbaijan had objected that the meeting should not be held in a country "in conflict," so the location was moved from Yerevan to Moscow. Ohanian said he was disappointed by this decision because he had planned to host the Azerbaijani Defense Minister, Safar Abbiyev, and had planned to include Azerbaijani folk dances and songs in the cultural part of the program.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) The better we get to know Minister Ohanian, the more we like him as a partner in political-military efforts. He seems a straightforward interlocutor, who is respected in the Armenian government and within the Defense Ministry. His credibility as a soldier is very high, given his long experience commanding NKSDF troops. We are pleased to find General Ohanian interested and committed on Armenia's NATO-related defense reform efforts and Euro-Atlantic ties. Having spent his military career in NK -- a no-go area for U.S. Embassy and DAO personnel -- Ohanian was a complete unknown to us when Serzh Sargsian named him Chief of the General Staff in 2007, and then promoted him to be Minister of Defense in 2008. Ohanian is believed to be a friend and loyal supporter of President Serzh Sargsian, trusted to run the MOD as a good soldier, and to steer clear of politics.

¶11. (C) Ohanian is not a Soviet-trained general. He cut his teeth as a bright and effective commander of NK troops during Armenia's hot war (1991-94) and then uneasy ceasefire with Azerbaijan. He was a young tank battalion commander at the outbreak of that war, and not really the product of the Soviet military education system. His experience was practical, and did not leave him in the thrall of the Soviet/Russian defense establishment, as was true of his predecessor and most other Armenian generals. Ohanian,

YEREVAN 00000103 003.2 OF 003

Kotanjian, Defense Policy Director Col. David Tonoyan, and other key reformist rising stars in the Defense Ministry, leave us hopeful about the MOD's prospects over time to transform itself and move closer to the Euro-Atlantic model we hope to see Armenia embrace. This outcome can be accelerated with increased funding resources for English language and professional military education for Armenia's rising generation of junior and field-grade officers. Armenia's general officer corps, unfortunately, remains mostly in the mold of the corrupt, incompetent, and Soviet indoctrinated General Khachaturov, who now serves as Chief of the General Staff. However, this aging cadre of bad generals is few in number, and close to retirement. Coming up behind them is a cohort of field-grade officers that includes some bright, dynamic, young professionals who may be expected to bring a very different approach and set of values.

PENNINGTON